DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 115 EC 131 348

AUTHOR Bennett, Randy Elliot
TITLE Issues in the Educational Assessment of Children with Learning and Behavior Disorders.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 14p.: Paper presented at a Topical Conference of The Council for Exceptional Children (Minneapolis, MN, August, 1980, Cracker Barrel 4). Adapted from material developed for the American Academy of Pediatrics' Training Project for Physicians Serving Handicapped Children.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Problems: Cultural Differences: Elementary Secondary Education: *Evaluation Methods: *Learning Disabilities: Parent Role: *Student Evaluation: Testing: *Testing Problems: Test Reliability: Test Validity

ABSTRACT

The paper examines seven pressing issues in the educational assessment of children with learning and behavior disorders. Research and court cases are cited in the discussion of the following issues (sample subtopics in parentheses): focus of assessment (for clarification, identification, and classification purposes): types of abilities evaluated (skills or task performance vs. process): methods used (formal vs. informal, criterion referenced vs. norm referenced): technical adequacy of available measures: personnel involved in assessment (qualifications, certification): assessment of culturally different children (possible causes of minority overrepresentation in classes for the educable mentally retarded): and involvement of parents in the assessment process (arguments for and against active parent participation). (CL)

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Issues in the Educational Assessment of Children with Learning and Behavior Disorders

Randy Elliot Bennett

Director, Special Education

Division of Educational Services

Educational Testing Service

Princeton, New Jersey 08541

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Paper presented at the Council for Exceptional Children Topical Conference on Seriously Emotionally Disturbed, Minneapolis, August 1980. Adapted from material developed for the American Academy of Pediatrics' Training Project for Physicians Serving Handicapped Children.

EC 131 418

ED Conference Paper

Issues in the Educational Assessment of Children with Learning and Behavior Disorders

This paper presents an overview of seven major issues in the assessment of children with learning and behavior disorders. These issues relate to the (a) focus of assessment, (b) types of abilities evaluated, (c) methods used, (d) technical adequacy of available measures, (e) personnel involved in assessment, (f) assessment of culturally different children, and (g) involvement of parents in the assessment process.

Issue 1: On What Should Assessment Focus?

Assessment in special education may be conducted for a variety of purposes (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1978). The purposes for which assessment seems to have been primarily conducted in the past are identification and classification. Many have argued, however, that assessment primarily conducted for these purposes is wasteful (Wallace & Larsen, 1978). They have argued this for a variety of reasons including that:

- assessment for identification/classification tends to produce information that is generally not useful in instructional planning.
- some classifications (especially LD, EMR, ED) cannot be reliably differentiated.
- assessment for purposes of identification is unnecessary because failure in the regular classroom is evidence enough of special need.

On the other hand, it should be noted that:

- assessment serves to confirm that a child has a special need. Assessment should prevent normal children from being identified as special because of poor relationships with individual teachers, difficulty functioning in a particular class, etc., and in this sense is legitimate as an identification activity.
- assessment for classification purposes, while probably having little educational use, is an administrative necessity because of federal reporting requirements and mandates as to who is to receive services.

Assessment, then, probably needs to satisfy demands both for data on which to base decisions of identification and classification and for information relevant to the instructional process.

Issue 2: What Should Be Assessed?

The question here centers on whether assessment should concentrate on the types of skills children come to school to learn (e.g., reading, math, social skills) or on the perceptual and cognitive processes (e.g., visual perception, auditory memory) that appear to underlie those skills. Those who believe that assessment should focus on skills or task performance (Vellutino, Steger, Moyer, Harding, & Niles, 1977; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1978) have noted that:

- o disagreement exists as to how to define perception (much less measure it).
- o most popular measures of perceptual processes are of questionable reliability and validity.
- o existing research has questioned the extent to which such processes can be trained.
- o available research has strongly challenged the extent to which the training of such processes results in improved academic functioning.

The process approach appears, however, to be the more widely used of the two assessment approaches (Arter & Jenkins, 1977). Given recent advances and interest in the study of cognitive processes, some refinement of the process approach or combination of it with the task/skill approach may eventually occur. For the present, however, a convincing argument exists for centering assessment on academic and social skills as opposed to perceptual and cognitive processes.

Issue 3: What Tools Should Be Used in Assessment?

This issue can be conceptualized along at least two dimensions. First, there is the question of formal vs. informal tools. Formal tools can be taken to mean those that are standardized, i.e., those measures meant to be

administered and scored under a carefully specified set of conditions (Cronbach, 1970). Informal tools, by this definition, are those that are nonstandardized, i.e., those for whom no such set of specific administrative and scoring criteria exist. Those who argue for the use of informal measures as the primary instruments of assessment (e.g. Wallace & Larsen, 1978) point out that:

- o informal measures can be tailored to the needs of the individual being assessed.
- o informal measures can be constructed directly from the curriculum and materials in which the child is working and are therefore more "content-relevant" than formal procedures.

In advocating use of formal procedures, it is argued that:

- o such procedures permit comparisons among children because each child is presented with the same task under closely similar conditions.
- o the technical characteristics of such procedures are known, whereas reliability and validity of specific informal procedures is, by definition, not known (Bennett, Note 1). (The generalization of estimates of technical quality presupposes that a procedure will be used in the same way from one time to the next. Informal procedures are by their very nature modified from one use to the next. Hence estimates of technical quality are not possible.)

The second dimension along which the issue of what tools to use in assessment can be viewed is one of norm vs. criterion-reference. This dimension is somewhat different from, and hence should not be confused with, that of formal vs. informal assessment. Norm and criterion-reference essentially refer to methods of interpreting assessment tools or to tools that facilitate a particular type of interpretation.

In norm-referenced measurement the performance of the child being assessed is compared to that of the child's peer group (e.g., age, grade, socio-cultural group). In criterion-referenced measurement the child's performance is interpreted in terms of mastery of a specific skill or content domain (e.g., the 100 basic multiplication facts). It should be noted that criterion-referenced

measures can be either informal (i.e., teacher-made) or formal, published measures meant to be given under standardized conditions (Bennett, Note 1).

Those who advocate the use of criterion-referenced measurement (e.g., Howell, Kaplan, & O'Connell, 1979) state that because of its focus on skill and domain comparisons it:

- o provides more instructionally relevant information than norm-referenced tools.
- o permits more frequent measurement of student skills than traditionally used tools.
- o avoids potentially harmful comparisons of one pupil to another.

In support of the use of norm-referenced measurement, it can be said that this type of measurement:

- o permits monitoring of a child's progress toward his or her peer group.
- o allows comparison of a child's skills across skill areas. (Some normative frame is necessary if a child's relative skills in reading and math are to be compared, for example.)
- o recognizes the fact that children differ and allows for measurement of those differences.
- o avoids difficulties specific to criterion-referenced measurement such as the problem of defining mastery levels. (Is mastery of the multiplication facts defined by 100% correct performance? 95%? 90%? 85%?)

Taking the arguments of those in favor of formal, informal, criterion-referenced, and norm-referenced assessment into consideration, perhaps the most sensible stance may be to acknowledge that all four types of measurement serve legitimate purposes and provide information useful in the assessment of exceptional children. This view implies a multi-method approach to assessment in which the various types of measures are used for those purposes for which they are best suited and no single type of measure is used to the exclusion of any other. Judicious use of all four types of measures reduces the possibility that flaws inherent in any one type of measure will result in the provision of

inaccurate data to decision makers.

Issue 4: How Technically Adequate Are Currently Available Assessment Tools?

The technical adequacy of currently available assessment tools (particularly formal tools such as tests) has recently become a topic of growing concern. Those who have expressed this concern (e.g., Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1978) have stated that:

- o the process of tool development is often not fully described in instrument manuals.
- o data regarding reliability and validity are frequently not given or do not support use of the tool for the recommended purpose.

In response it should be noted that:

- o many of the assessment tools currently available were developed and published by small entrepreneurial concerns and not by reputable test publishers.
- o proliferation of such tools is encouraged by poorly trained users whose market supports the development and publication of inadequate tools.
- o the federal government has generally avoided funding the development of assessment tools for use with the handicapped.
- o the major test publishers have yet to make a concerted effort to develop tools specifically for use with the handicapped.

Issue 5: Who Should Assess?

The issue of who should assess can also be conceptualized as a multifaceted problem. One facet of the problem is that of professional role. Should assessment be conducted by the school psychologist, learning disability specialist, reading teacher, speech pathologist, or educational diagnostician? A partial answer to this question is given by P.L. 94-142 which calls for multidisciplinary assessment (U.S. Office of Education, 1977). The law, however, seems to suggest that this requirement can be minimally satisfied by a team of two persons, one of whom is a teacher. The extent to which other professionals are

to be involved in assessment is a matter that appears to be left up to the states and localities, and the demands of the individual case. In the final analysis, however, the choice of who should assess probably should be made on the basis of "qualifications."

The second facet of the problem of who should assess flows directly from the first one: Who is "qualified" to assess? P.L. 94-142 seems to take the point of view that those who are "qualified" to perform a function are those certified to perform the function. However, there is increasing concern and mounting evidence to suggest that many certified evaluation personnel may not be proficient in the basic competencies necessary for adequate performance of the assessment function (Bennett, 1980; Bennett, in press). At least for the case of assessment then, "certified" and "qualified" may not mean the same thing.

Issue 6: How Can Children Be Assessed in a Racially and Culturally Nondiscriminatory Way?

The issue of nonbiased assessment is probably the most complex issue in special education assessment today. In large part it stems from the fact of substantial minority overrepresentation in classes for the educable mentally retarded, which have been said by some critics to be dead-end, low quality programs (Larry P. v. Wilson Riles, 1979).

Some possible causes for minority overrepresentation in such classes are:

- bias in the assessment tools used for placement (e.g., IQ tests).
- bias in the assessment process (e.g., in the way the process is set up and carried out).
- a higher incidence of mild mental retardation in minority groups because of poor nutrition, inadequate neonatal care, and other conditions associated with minority overrepresentation in the lower socio-economic classes.

- genetically lower intelligence in minority groups.

Much of the discussion over the cause of overrepresentation has focused on the hypothesis of bias in assessment tools, particularly IQ tests. Evidence cited in support of the bias hypothesis (Larry P. v. Wilson Riles, 1979) includes:

- the fact that minority children on the average score substantially lower on such tests than majority children.
- the assertion that the research base supporting the predictive validity of such tests for use with minority children is very limited.
- the belief that content stressed in such tests may favor middle-class children.

Evidence cited in response to the bias hypothesis (MacMillan & Meyers, 1977), includes:

- the assertion that IQ tests are measures of learned abilities (not measures of innate potential), and that differences in mean scores among racial groups are reflective of inequities in home environment, health care, opportunity for learning, social status, etc.
- the belief that the research that does exist supports the utility of such tests as predictors of achievement in the standard school curriculum.
- the contention that the content of such tests mirrors the standard school curriculum, and that as long as that curriculum is thought to be of importance for minority children, the use of instruments that reflect the curriculum is legitimate.

The hypothesis of instrument bias has yet to be proved conclusively one way or the other and, in fact, may prove to be too narrow a view of the causal factors involved in minority overrepresentation in special education. That the hypothesis of instrument bias may be too narrow a view is suggested by growing indications of bias in the assessment process. These indications include:

- reports of disproportionate referral of minorities for preplacement evaluation.
- a lack of substantial reduction in disproportionate enrollments in California EMR classes even though IQ tests have not been in use for such placement for a number of years (Larry P. v. Wilson Riles, 1979).
- research suggesting that regardless of assessment results, decisions

about pupils are significantly affected by such extraneous factors as race, sex, and physical appearance (Ysseldyke, Note 2).

- the growing evidence suggesting that assessment is often not competently performed (Bennett, in press).

In response to concerns for nonbiased assessment, a number of actions have been suggested or taken. These include:

- moratoriums against the use of IQ tests (e.g., in California as a result of Larry P.).
- use of newly developed tools (e.g., SOMPA--System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment).
- in-service training to facilitate more competent and careful use of existing tools.

The first suggestion, by advocating the exclusion of a class of assessment tools, may serve to do more harm to the assessment process than good (MacMillan & Meyers, 1977). The second suggestion, to use newly developed methods like SOMPA, ignores the need for empirical proof that these methods are more fair and accurate than existing methods. Such evidence has yet to be provided for most innovative procedures including the Estimated Learning Potential measure of SOMPA. The third suggestion, in effect, calls for attempts to engender competence in assessment. It stresses an approach to assessment that:

- is multi-method.
- is multi-factored (i.e., focuses on evaluation of a number of different skills or abilities).
- is multidisciplinary.
- uses assessment tools for purposes and with groups for whom those tools have been shown to be valid and reliable.
- utilizes personnel knowledgeable about the cultures, problems, and needs of minority groups.

This approach to the problem of bias in assessment, too, is an unproven solution to an extremely difficult problem.

Issue 7: To What Extent Should Parents Be Involved in the Assessment Process?

P.L. 94-142 mandates that parents be notified of the school's desire to conduct an evaluation, informed of the data on which the decision to conduct an evaluation was based, and told of their due process and other legal rights (U.S. Office of Education, 1977). In addition, the school must obtain consent from parents before conducting the preplacement assessment. Finally, parent involvement is mandated during development and annual review of the IEP.

An active role for parents in the assessment process, beyond due process and consent requirements, is not specified by P.L. 94-142. It can be argued that such a role would:

- help prevent inappropriate identification and classification decisions.
- provide parents with a greater understanding of the educational process.
- give parents a greater opportunity for involvement in gathering the data that provides the basis for decision making.

As active participants, parents could:

- record and report data on the child's functioning at home and with peers.
- provide developmental and family background information.
- provide results of any previous evaluations.
- arrange for provision of medical and health data.

Arguments against the active involvement of parents in assessment might include:

- parents' lack of knowledge and skill in assessment.
- the possibility that active parent involvement might make the assessment process less efficient.
- the possibility that active parent involvement would in some way negatively affect or inhibit the functioning of assessment professionals.

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